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THE UNSEEN HOST
AND OTHER WAR PLAYS

Plays

By PERCIVAL WILDE

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DAWN and Other One-Act Plays of Life
To-day.

*Dawn — The Noble Lord — The Traitor — A
House of Cards — Playing With Fire — The
Finger of God.*

CONFESSIOAL and Other American
Plays.

*Confessional — The Villain in the Piece —
According to Darwin — A Question of Morality
— The Beautiful Story.*

THE UNSEEN HOST and Other War
Plays.

*The Unseen Host — Mothers of Men — Pawns
— In the Ravine — Valkyrie!*

THE UNSEEN HOST AND OTHER WAR PLAYS

THE UNSEEN HOST
MOTHERS OF MEN
PAWNS
IN THE RAVINE
VALKYRIE!

BY
PERCIVAL WILDE



BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1917

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1917

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Published September, 1917

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To
I. W.



PREFACE

IT is the immemorial privilege of authorship to take every side of an argument; to view a thing as it is to each of many different men. Of a great subject only a few aspects may be discerned from any one coign of vantage. It is the right of an author to look upon it through the eyes of a multitude of characters, to set down how it appears to each one of them, and how they, in turn, react to it.

This is a book of viewpoints.

The great facts of life mean different things to the various persons who come into contact with them. War is one of those facts. It cannot signify to the peasant what it does to the educated man; still it has a very definite, very concrete meaning for each of them. Its meaning changes with the intellect, the emotional background, the character of each person who is affected by it. Materialist or idealist, skeptic or believer, hero or craven, each takes from it what he brings to it, each finds in it support for his convictions.

There are those, who like the Greeks, draw down their gods to champion them in their combats;

There are those, who in the words of their prophet, believe that "a good fight justifies any cause";

There are those who understand, or think they understand, and act accordingly;

There are those who do not understand, and do not wish to understand;

And there are those, high and low, who may take no active part, but who suffer.

These disjointed phrases, in a few words, convey the thought behind the plays.

Art knows no nationality. If in "Valkyrie" the author has looked through German eyes it is because in other of the plays he has looked through Allied eyes. Without such a play the book would not be complete. For this, neither apologies nor regrets. Our enemies are our enemies none the less if we strive to understand them precisely as they understand themselves.

A word upon "The Unseen Host."

Mr Arthur Machen's ingenious tale of "The Bowmen," despite his repeated denials, is accepted as truth by a startlingly large number of people.

One refers quite casually to the Angels of Mons; they are as well known as the Battle of Mons itself; they have passed into legend, co-eval, co-eternal with the great conflict which supplies them with a background. One is inclined to forget that Mr. Machen evolved them out of thin air, and that their only authentic appearance is in his pages.

At the Battle of Mons, a mere handful of British troops barred the progress of an entire German army corps. What was the explanation? Determination; downright bravery; superior morale; these were abstractions which signified little to a public which demanded something more tangible. And when Mr.

Machen, in a tale made convincing by its wealth of detail, related that a vegetarian Briton, a member of the heroic little army, had in the moment of supreme trial murmured the magic words "*Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius,*" and that thereupon, amidst outlandish shouting, St. George and the bowmen of Agincourt had come to the relief of the hard-pressed English, the public was satisfied. That numbers do not invariably connote strength; that a few resolute men might prove a very serious obstacle to a force ten times greater, this the public was not prepared to believe. But a regiment or two, if reinforced by St. George and the bowmen of Agincourt might accomplish almost anything. That was natural and logical.

It is remarkable that such beliefs should exist. It is remarkable that a myth, which has not the slightest vestige of evidence to support it, should be accepted as Gospel. But where there is the will to believe, beliefs will not be wanting.

Yet Mr. Machen is a reasonable, level-headed gentleman. He is neither a ready believer nor a scoffer. "They will be mistaken," he says of his readers, "if they suppose that I think miracles in Judæa credible but miracles in France or Flanders incredible." This brilliant line of a brilliant preface furnished the inspiration for "The Unseen Host." It is a pleasure to offer thanks to one of the most interesting figures in modern literature.

Concerning the plays themselves, nothing more need be said. Upon the stage a play is offered to an audience without the aid of long and elaborate explana-

tions. It is in a similar form that the printed play must be offered to its readers. The present preface exists only because the five plays are related to each other; because a word upon that subject may bring the reader to a sympathetic understanding of the author's purpose.

New York, July, 1917.

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THE UNSEEN HOST

Opus 48



THE UNSEEN HOST

At an improvised American hospital in Paris. A large room, with the traces of former magnificence, now serving as living room to the surgeon in charge. At the rear, tall Gothic windows of leaded glass — heavily curtained. At the right, two doors, huge, ancient — that nearer the audience leading into an interior room: that farther off opening on the upper landing of a staircase. At the left, an enormous fireplace. What little furniture there is is massive and ornate. The most conspicuous piece is a heavy table near the center of the room. On the table is a bronze desk lamp.

It is evening. In the room itself no lights are burning, and there is semi-darkness.

The first door opens, and a uniformed orderly enters quietly. He is a middle-aged man who lacks an arm; the medal on his breast may explain why. He deposits a sheaf of papers on the table; proceeds to the windows and closes the curtains.

Steps are heard ascending the stairs, the second door opens, and the surgeon, a white-clad, elderly American who holds himself very erect despite his years, stands at the threshold deferentially awaiting a compatriot some ten years his junior, the best type of the successful American man of affairs.

THE SURGEON (*holding the door open*)

This way.

THE VISITOR (*appearing at the head of the flight of stairs*)

Is he in here?

THE SURGEON

Who?

THE VISITOR

The boy who saw the angels?

THE SURGEON (*smiling*)

Oh, you haven't forgotten him, have you? He's in the next room. (*The visitor enters, obviously winded by the climb*) I'll show him to you afterwards. Get your breath first. You look a little exhausted.

THE VISITOR (*grinning*)

A little? Quite a little.

THE SURGEON

Sit down here. (*The orderly proffers a chair. The visitor sits. The surgeon turns on the desk lamp*) This house was built before the Grand Monarque taught them to have an eye to comfort. Magnificent — splendid — all that sort of thing, but mighty unpleasant if you have to live in it. Think of the stretcher bearers carrying men up those stairs!

THE VISITOR

There ought to be an elevator.

THE SURGEON

Yes.

THE VISITOR

Put one in. Send me the bill.

THE SURGEON (*nodding*)

Thank you. We need it badly. (*The orderly leaves the room by the first door*) These old houses, very picturesque, very ornamental —

THE VISITOR

But no conveniences?

THE SURGEON

The men who built them didn't know the meaning of the word. We felt that when we turned this into a hospital. Think of it: it used to be a show place! Not much left of it now. There was a bed here — right where you are sitting; one of those great, big, canopied affairs —

THE VISITOR

Unsanitary.

THE SURGEON

Very. That's why I had it taken out. But Henry of Navarre had spent a night in it.

THE VISITOR

Even Henry of Navarre had to give way to modern efficiency!

THE SURGEON (*nodding*)

Yes. (*He points to the door through which the orderly has gone*) That was his anteroom the next morning. Can you picture it? The courtiers: the crowds of lords and ladies: the nobility of France waiting to greet His Majesty!

THE VISITOR (*strolling over*)

Nothing like that to-day, is there?

THE SURGEON (*opening the door*)

I don't know. Look! the rows of beds, and the quiet men who are lying in them. The nobility of France? Those painted and befrilled lords and ladies were no whit more noble than are these! (*He pauses*) The King's anteroom! It is more that now than it ever was!

THE VISITOR (*understanding*)

Waiting to meet His Majesty.

THE SURGEON (*closing the door quietly*) I didn't know you were a poet. But it doesn't need much of this atmosphere to change a man's view of life. It's intoxicating. (*He turns*) From these windows you could have watched the Catholics murdering the Huguenots three hundred and fifty years ago. Twenty years later you would have seen a Huguenot king going to sleep in this room. Why, I could talk about the place for hours! What wonderful men and women have sat where we are sitting! What a glorious company has passed through these moldering doors! What ghosts hover about us while we speak!

[*The visitor starts violently.*]

THE SURGEON

What is it?

THE VISITOR

I thought I heard something.

THE SURGEON (*smiling*)

They are friendly ghosts. (*Shrewdly*) But you said before that you didn't believe in them!

THE VISITOR

Neither I do.

THE SURGEON

Or angels?

THE VISITOR

Call them what you like.

THE SURGEON

Well, then?

THE VISITOR

I thought I saw something. (*Apologetically*) The light is so dim.

THE SURGEON

The men in the next room don't like bright lights.

THE VISITOR

But you can keep the door closed.

THE SURGEON (*shaking his head*)

It won't stay closed. It's rickety — like everything else in the building. (*He crosses to the windows*) I'll open the curtains if you like.

THE VISITOR (*watching him*)

Aren't you afraid of the Zeppelins?

THE SURGEON

Too much of a fatalist for that. They were here a week ago.

THE VISITOR

And didn't hurt you?

THE SURGEON

Blew up yards and yards of pavement with the result that we had to lay wooden boards in the street. The hospital wasn't damaged.

THE VISITOR (*evidently referring to a previous conversation*)

Another miracle!

THE SURGEON

What?

THE VISITOR (*mildly bantering*)

You seem to live in the midst of the supernatural!

THE SURGEON (*nodding gravely*)

Yes.

THE VISITOR

And you were born in Bangor, Maine, and studied medicine at Johns Hopkins!

THE SURGEON (*after a pause*)

You are a Christian, I take it?

THE VISITOR

Why — naturally.

THE SURGEON

You believe that a miracle happened in Palestine.

You deny that another might happen in Flanders.

THE VISITOR (*uneasily*)

Well, if you put it *that* way —

THE SURGEON

Now I'm going to read you the boy's statement.

[*He sits at the table, and goes through the contents of one of the drawers. The first door opens slowly. The visitor watches it, fascinated. He draws his breath sharply. The surgeon looks up; takes in the situation.*]

THE VISITOR

The door's opening!

THE SURGEON

I warned you; it has a habit of doing that.

[*The orderly enters through the opened door, crosses to the other door, goes. The visitor draws a breath of relief.*]

THE SURGEON (*smiling*)

For a disbeliever you are easily startled. (*The visitor does not reply*) Now listen. (He reads) "I saw them. I know I saw them. Whether they were angels, whether they were devils, whether they were living or dead, I do not know. But they were shining shapes, and nothing could withstand them. We were pressed — hard pressed. Another ten minutes, and it would have been all over with us.

We would have been crushed by the advancing hordes, trodden under into the mire. And then I heard a tramping, a tramping gradually growing louder, a tramping first challenging the roar of the battle, and then overwhelming it, drowning it, so that all sound had become one huge rhythmic tramp, tramp, tramp! I thought my eardrums would burst. And then I looked up and beheld the light reflected on their armor, and the sky filled with a huge glitter, and the rays of the sun shining through showers of arrows! And the enemy melted away before us: melted by the hundreds; by the thousands; by the tens of thousands; and those celestial hosts tramped upwards, tramped up that invisible pathway into the heavens, tramped out of sight!"

[*He stops.*

THE VISITOR (*after a pause*)

And then?

THE SURGEON

Then a bullet struck him, and he was unconscious until they brought him here.

THE VISITOR (*after another pause; emphasizing the inconsistency*)

Tramping ghosts!

THE SURGEON

Why not?

THE VISITOR (*positively*)

Ghosts are noiseless.

THE SURGEON (*shrewdly*)

If you speak from experience —

THE VISITOR (*nettled*)

I didn't say I believed in them.

THE SURGEON (*innocently*)

No; you said quite the opposite.

THE VISITOR (*dogmatically*)

Anyhow, ghosts don't tramp!

THE SURGEON (*gently bantering*)

Not even a ghostly tramp? They clank chains, I am told. Why shouldn't their steps have a sound? A sort of a hollow, ghostly sound?

THE VISITOR

Bah! Are you sure the bullet struck him *after* he saw the — the angels?

THE SURGEON

So he says.

THE VISITOR

Hm! And you take *his* word for it! (*He walks over to the door*) Dying, you say?

THE SURGEON

Three quarters dead already.

THE VISITOR

And young?

THE SURGEON

Nineteen — one of thousands. Oh, it's not romantic in the least. He's barely conscious; and he's waiting to go back to the front. He thinks he's going to get well.

THE VISITOR

They all think that, don't they? He won't?

THE SURGEON

Never in *this* world. Queer, isn't it? Shot clean through the body; suffering like the devil, and all he's thinking of is when he's to go back — when he's to rejoin his regiment!

THE VISITOR

Like an animal trying to return to the slaughter pen.

THE SURGEON (*pointedly*)

Yes: if animals saw angels.

THE VISITOR

Hm! (*He pauses*) Do you really believe he saw them?

THE SURGEON

I read you his statement.

THE VISITOR

Which he wrote himself?

THE SURGEON

Hardly; he knows no English.

THE VISITOR

Why didn't you take it down in the original?

THE SURGEON

I did. (*He produces a second sheet of paper*) Here it is. (*He pauses; smiles*) I translated it, paraphrased it, for my own pleasure, if you like. The original is a mass of ejaculations; short phrases, repeated over and over again. I tried to make it coherent.

THE VISITOR

And repeated it back to him? (*The surgeon shakes his head*) Why not?

THE SURGEON

He takes no notice of anything.

THE VISITOR

Oh! Not quite in his senses?

THE SURGEON

No.

THE VISITOR

Raving? And you believe his ravings?

THE SURGEON

I neither believe nor disbelieve.

THE VISITOR

But an insane man?

THE SURGEON (*with emphasis*)

Who has not had the education to *invent* what he told me! Imaginative? Not in the least. He was a farm hand before the war.

THE VISITOR (*persistently*)

Still, in his delirium —

THE SURGEON (*interrupting*)

He wouldn't rave like a poet. You forget: I have listened to so many others. (*He pauses*) You think I am credulous. Perhaps. I neither affirm nor deny. They tell me of these things they call miracles —

THE VISITOR (*interrupting*)

And you ask no explanation?

THE SURGEON

Why must there be one?

THE VISITOR

There always is.

THE SURGEON

Yes; generally more miraculous than the miracle itself. (*He pauses; then, with solemnity*) When, in the twentieth century, I myself have seen millions of men leaving their peaceful homes, their work, their occupations, to kill one another, I say that is such a dreadful, such an unbelievable miracle that next to it everything else becomes insignificant. If this paperweight were to turn into a roaring lion

before my eyes I would say that too was a miracle — but that all of humanity had been witness to a greater!

[*The first door opens slowly.*

THE VISITOR (*calling attention to it without alarm*)

The door is opening again.

[*The surgeon goes to it without a word; closes it.*

THE VISITOR (*as he does so*)

You would say that the soul of the dying soldier has come through that door on its way to rejoin its regiment!

THE SURGEON (*nodding gravely*)

If I were a poet.

[*As he speaks the second door opens deliberately. He watches it with a smile; the visitor with curious fascination.*

THE VISITOR

Gad!

[*The door closes of its own accord.*

THE VISITOR (*repeating as if hypnotized*)

To rejoin its regiment!

THE SURGEON (*after a pause*)

You didn't notice —

THE VISITOR (*sharply*)

What?

THE SURGEON (*mildly*)

To me — the room seemed somewhat lighter for an instant.

THE VISITOR

Bah!

THE SURGEON

A poetic conception of yours: the soul joins the

regiment of souls! All around us — above us — within us — the unseen host gathers its forces!

[There is the very, very faint sound of a bugle in the distance.]

THE VISITOR (*under his breath*)

Did you hear?

THE SURGEON

I heard.

THE VISITOR

A bugle!

THE SURGEON

Yes.

[They listen, and gradually there commences a curious, hollow, rhythmic tramp. Very subdued at first, it increases slowly in volume, without in the least accelerating its precise, martial rhythm. It grows louder, and louder, and louder; and nearer. The building seems to vibrate with the rhythmically recurrent footfall. The visitor rushes to the windows. He peers out. Then, in a tone of awe:]

THE VISITOR

Fog! Nothing but fog!

[Utterly bewildered, he turns. The tramping swells into a climax. Then, more quickly than it has grown, ebbs into silence.]

THE VISITOR (*breathlessly*)

What was it?

THE SURGEON

A regiment marching by.

THE VISITOR

But the tramp? The hollow tramp?

THE SURGEON (*very matter of fact*)

I told you — there is a board pavement.

THE VISITOR (*breaking into a high-pitched, hysterical laugh*)

So there is! So there is!

[*The second door opens, and the orderly, very much excited, stands on the threshold.*]

THE ORDERLY

Doctor!

THE SURGEON

Yes?

THE ORDERLY

The boy — the boy who saw the angels — where is he?

THE SURGEON

In there.

THE ORDERLY

You are sure?

[*The men look at each other silently.*]

THE SURGEON

Why do you ask?

THE ORDERLY

I saw him!

THE VISITOR

What?

THE ORDERLY

In the front ranks! With my own eyes! I saw him!

[*The surgeon hurries out of the room.*]

THE VISITOR (*after a tense pause*)

He was dying. Did you know that?

THE ORDERLY (*gravely*)

I knew.

[*The surgeon reënters.*]

THE VISITOR

Well?

THE SURGEON (*nodding quietly*)

Dead.

THE ORDERLY

I saw him! With my own eyes I saw him!

THE SURGEON

Dead not five minutes.

THE VISITOR (*staggered*)

But — but such things don't happen! There were thousands of boys like him!

THE SURGEON (*slowly*)

Yes.

THE VISITOR (*turning fiercely on the orderly*)

You must have been mistaken!

THE ORDERLY (*changing the word pointedly*)

I *might* have been mistaken.

THE SURGEON

Then, again, you might *not* have been —

[*The orderly nods quietly, understandingly. The visitor gasps. . . .*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS SLOWLY

MOTHERS OF MEN

Opus 46



MOTHERS OF MEN

“A sumptuously furnished drawing-room; magnificent furniture, priceless paintings, rugs more yielding than moss. And everything beautiful, costly, and in the best of good taste.”

Let the reader, if he will, imagine the precise opposite. Not that anything that strikes his eye is distinctly shabby, or that any particle of dust mars the neatness of the room; for Mrs. Chepstowe prides herself on her house-keeping, and would feel justly slighted at any animadversions upon it. But the furniture presents that curious conglomerate effect which indicates a compromise between comfort and fashion. The late Mr. Chepstowe cared entirely for the former; his widow struggled as best she could for the latter. The result is distressing: could not have been more distressing even if the family purse had been deeper. For the room is crammed with an abundance of poorly designed and cheaply made movables. In the care of a less conscientious owner they would have fallen to pieces long ago. But by dint of plenty of elbow grease they retain something of their pristine condition, something of the congenital senility, of the old-maidish stiffness and primness of the Victorian period.

“There is no place like home,” sang the poet. He never knew how literally truthful his asseveration might become. For each of the thousand two-room apartments which Maida Vale boasts rejoices in monstrosities peculiar to

itself, sufficient to differentiate it immediately from all the others.

In the center of her beloved horrors sits Mrs. Chepstowe herself, a well-preserved widow of some fifty odd years, with "middle-class" almost visibly written over her features. Mr. Chepstowe had considered himself part of the backbone of the British nation, and had announced himself as such times without number over the counter of his ironmonger's shop on Ludgate Hill. His widow continues to live up to his reputation, and as she sits knitting in her easy-chair this crisp October afternoon, her thoughts wander with a certain pride to the past, which was a tedious but emphatic uphill climb, and with a sudden pang to the present, for, like a million other British women, she has a son "somewhere in France," and would give much to see him face to face.

The doorbell rings.

Mrs. Chepstowe folds her knitting carefully, rises, and leaves the room. She is heard to open the door to the hall. There is a sound of voices. Presently words become distinguishable.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*outside*)

If you will step in here . . . (*She opens the door to the living room. A woman of the same age, but far better dressed, — presumably a member of fashionable society, precedes her into the room*) Yes? What can I do for you? (*But the caller is in a fearful state of excitement, trembling, flustered, unable to speak coherently, and Mrs. Chepstowe recognizes it*) Won't you sit down? [*She offers a chair.*]

THE CALLER (*sitting, with a gasp of relief*)

Thank you.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

And a cup of tea?

THE CALLER

No, no.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*proceeding towards the tea-table*)

It will take only a minute.

THE CALLER

No, no. I couldn't drink anything.

[*There is a pause. Then Mrs. Chepstowe makes an effort to relieve the situation.*]

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Lovely weather we've been having, isn't it? And so unusual at this time of year. I went for a walk yesterday, and I don't know when I enjoyed anything so much.

THE CALLER

Yes, yes.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

I started bright and early in the morning. (*She checks off on her fingers*) Abercorn Place, Abbey Road, Marlborough Road, Queen's Road, all the way to Primrose Park. Then I came back by way of Park Road and St. John's Wood. I felt quite refreshed.

[*She pauses.*]

THE CALLER (*taking up her subject suddenly*)

You are Mrs. Albert Chepstowe?

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Yes.

THE CALLER

I am Mrs. Howard Chepstowe.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*interested*)

Oh, we have the same name, haven't we? And it's such an unusual name. Do your husband's people come from Lancashire, by any chance?

THE CALLER (*with a visible effort*)

No: Devon.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*disappointed*)

Oh. I didn't know there were any Chepstoves living there. (*Confidentially*) There was an aunt of my husband's who was so much interested in genealogy, and who traced the Chepstowe family all the way back to the Conquest. She'd have been so glad to know you.

THE CALLER (*interrupting abruptly*)

Mrs. Chepstowe, this came for me yesterday.

[*She fumbles in her chatelaine, and pulls out an envelope with the royal crest and the H. M. B. frank on it. Mrs. Chepstowe takes it, but recognizes its import even before she has opened the flap.*]

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

You poor thing!

THE CALLER (*breaking into tears*)

You know what it is?

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Every woman in the Kingdom knows. Every woman in the Kingdom is afraid of getting such a letter any day. (*She shakes her head in sympathy*) Who was it? Your husband?

THE CALLER (*between her sobs*)

No — he's been dead many years.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Then your son?

THE CALLER

My son. My only son.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

I don't know what to say to you. I really don't.

[*There is a pause.*]

THE CALLER

For a week, no letter from him. Then this: killed at La Bassée, the twenty-ninth.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

The twenty-ninth? That was Michaelmas.

THE CALLER

As if it made any difference what day it was! All that I know is that from now on it will be the most terrible day in the year to me. The twenty-ninth; I went to theater that evening. Perhaps the letter was even then on its way to me . . . Yesterday it came, with the first mail. What I have gone through since — you can't imagine!

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*gently*)

I don't have to imagine. I have a son at the front myself. (*She pauses; smiles sadly. The caller makes no remark*) He didn't enlist in the early days of the war. An only child, you see, and I wasn't anxious to have him go. Just the two of us there were, and I thought the mothers who had more than one son might give up some of theirs. I had no one but Tom. So we talked it over. He was eager; said that England needed every man who was strong enough to shoulder a gun, but he looked at me, and around our cosy little home, and he must have seen the expression in my eyes, because he said he'd wait a while. And I said, "Yes, Tom." And then he'd come home

evenings, and tell me how his friends had gone off, and how Dickie Fitzgerald was a corporal now, and how Will Tupper, that great, big, hulking fellow, who they thought would never amount to anything, had gotten the V. C. Will Tupper, whom Tom had given a beating in his school days! Then he'd pick up the paper, and he'd say, "Mother, Kitchener needs more men." I knew what was coming, but I acted as if it was nothing. I said, "Yes, Tom." We come of an old fighting stock, you know. His great-grandfather fought through the Peninsular War. It was his blood in Tom's veins, and it needed more than I could add to cool it down. So I said nothing, but I went over Tom's clothes — saw that he had warm underwear, and heavy socks. And then, then, I had always thought it would be of an evening, but it wasn't — it was after breakfast one Sunday, Tom pushed his plate away, and looked at me — just looked at me. I knew what it meant. Without his saying a word, I knew what it meant. I had seen that look so often in my dreams and I had awakened so often trembling, hoping it was only a nightmare. But I said, "Yes, Tom." (*She bows her head and is silent an instant*) He took me in his arms, and I put my lips up to his — he's much taller than I — and he said, "Little mother, I'm going to leave you to-morrow," and I said, "Yes, Tom." He squared his shoulders, did my boy, and he said, "There's a man's work to be done," and — and the next night I ate my supper alone.

THE CALLER (*after a pause, gently*)

I know how you felt.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*nodding, and wiping away a tear*)

I used to say that to myself: that there were so many other mothers whose sons meant just as much to them as mine meant to me. But I can't believe it. I don't suppose any of them believe it. That's what it is to be a mother.

THE CALLER (*half to herself*)

They're all alike, aren't they?

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*without answering*)

I know how I used to worry about his scrapes when he was at school. He wasn't a *bad* boy, but he was a mischievous boy: he was always up to something. (*She smiles*) One day he came home full of splinters: more splinters than boy, I think. He had climbed the flag-pole, and slid down too fast. Anybody else would have broken a leg, at least. Tom wasn't a bit upset; would have done it again, except that the splinters hurt. Another day he fell out of the window, trying to see who could lean out furthest. He won. (*She pauses*) Well, after a few of those things had happened it wasn't so bad. I made up my mind he wasn't born to be killed — or he'd have been killed long ago. That's the one thought that comforts me to-day. (*With sudden recollection*) Oh, I beg your pardon. I was thoughtless.

THE CALLER

You needn't apologize. I used to think the same thing about *my* son. The scrapes that he got into at Eton? Why, it makes my hair stand on end even to think of them. And Cambridge was no better; it wasn't six months before he was hit over the head playing polo.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Oh, your son played polo? (*Naïvely*) You must be rich.

THE CALLER (*embarrassed*)

Mr. Chepstowe was well-to-do.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*eagerly*)

What was his business? My Mr. Chepstowe was an ironmonger.

THE CALLER

He had no business.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*surprised*)

What?

THE CALLER

He was a gentleman.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*vastly impressed*)

A gentleman! Now what do you think of that? (*She shakes her head*) I always wanted to be rich, if only for what I could have done for my boy. Eton — and Cambridge — and polo — I always wanted him to have such things, but I could never afford them. (*Looking at the caller with added respect*) Your son must have been an officer?

THE CALLER

No.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Not an officer?

THE CALLER

He enlisted the day war was declared. He had had no experience. I could have gotten him a commission, but he wouldn't take it: said he wasn't fit to command men who knew more than he did.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*appreciatively*)

That was fine, wasn't it? I suppose they sent him off to one of the training camps?

THE CALLER

Yes.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

That's what they did with my boy. Just to think of it! In a training camp, along with gentlemen! And then —

THE CALLER

Off to France.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*with a sudden change of tone*)

Yes; off to France.

[*There is a pause. The caller is evidently ill at ease. Then she continues, rather abruptly.*]

THE CALLER

Mrs. Chepstowe, I don't know what you'll think of me, but —

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Yes?

THE CALLER

You're so wonderful about it that I don't know what to say. And it was the only reason I came here. (*She stops uncertainly. Mrs. Chepstowe is silent. The caller takes the plunge*) Do you know a man named Safford?

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Safford?

THE CALLER

Lieutenant the Honorable Cecil Safford?

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

The Honorable? How should I know an Honorable?

THE CALLER (*avoiding Mrs. Chepstowe's eyes*)

He was badly wounded some time ago: so badly they didn't dare move him. He was invalided home this week . . . He was in the same regiment as my son. When — when the letter came, I stopped in to see him.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*anticipating*)

And he told you that your son died fighting bravely —

THE CALLER (*interrupting with ill-concealed excitement*)

He hadn't heard. He didn't know until I told him. He wasn't with the regiment then. He had been wounded before that. I told you.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

I'm sorry; I forgot.

THE CALLER

He was shocked to hear about my son. They had been close friends; were in Cambridge together. But it suddenly occurred to him —
[*She breaks off.*]

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*encouragingly*)

Yes?

THE CALLER (*with averted face*)

I don't know what you'll think of me for saying this — it's too terrible. (*In desperation*) But I'm a mother, you know, and he's my only son. Lieutenant Safford suddenly recalled that there was another man in the regiment with the same name as my son.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*rising terror-stricken*)

The same name as your son? What do you mean?

THE CALLER (*also rising*)

Your son's name is Tom Chepstowe?

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Well?

THE CALLER (*facing her with compressed lips*)

That was the name!

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*with a wail*)

Oh, how *could* you!

THE CALLER (*with a fierce resolution*)

To a mother anything is permitted. The same name, the same regiment; they might have made a mistake.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE!

How dare you!

THE CALLER

It's my son or your son!

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

My son wasn't born to be killed!

THE CALLER

I thought the same thing.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

But I *know!*

THE CALLER

I went to the War Office, and they told me —

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*interrupting*)

That there was no mistake.

THE CALLER (*with emphasis*)

That they would try and make sure. (*Breaking down suddenly*) Mrs. Chepstowe, for twenty-four hours they've been trying to make sure! I thought I'd go mad! For twenty-four hours I've been *living* there, going from one clerk to another, directed, misdirected, and they're all so kind, and they don't

know, (*with pathetic sarcasm*) and they're trying to make sure. And in the meantime —!

[*She breaks off in agony.*]

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*regaining something of her equanimity after a pause*)

It isn't my son. I had a letter from him yesterday.

THE CALLER

I had a letter from *my* son to-day!

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*horrified*)

No!

THE CALLER

Dated the twenty-eighth. (*As the other looks her incredulity, she fumbles in her bag and pulls out a crumpled note*) Don't you believe me? Listen to this: "Dear Mater —" (*She chokes; reaches the note to Mrs. Chepstowe*) Read it yourself if you like.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*recoiling in horror*)

No! No!

THE CALLER

I couldn't stand it alone! It was more than I could bear! I came to you because you *must* listen! Because you are the one woman in the world who must share my agony with me!

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*with unutterable loathing*)

You beast!

THE CALLER

That's right! Call me names! Call me all the names you like! I know how you feel. And I would feel the same in your place. But I *had* to do it! At the War Office, a thousand other women, trying to find out, running from clerk to clerk, running from door to door, trying to make sure. *They* didn't

have time to listen to me. They were too busy telling their own stories. But you — you *must* listen! You must hear me!

[*There is a pause.*]

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*with a quivering gesture of the thumb*)
Mrs. Chepstowe, the door — the door!

THE CALLER

What?

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*trying to control herself*)

Will you go? — or shall I *throw* you out?

[*The door-bell rings. The women face each other, motionless, panting. Then Mrs. Chepstowe collects herself, and leaves the room quietly. A pause. Then, from outside, comes a pitiable gasp. The caller raises her head in instant comprehension; rushes to the door; flings it open. Outside stands Mrs. Chepstowe, tottering, barely keeping herself erect — and there is an envelope in her hand.*]

THE CALLER (*in an hysterical outburst*)

I was right! I knew it! Thank God! I was right!
I was right!

[*Mrs. Chepstowe advances slowly into the room: advances with the unsure step of a sick woman. The caller suddenly regains control of herself; is motionless, save for the nervous twitching of her lips, and her rapid breathing.*]

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*in an absolutely colorless voice*)

Let me see your letter.

THE CALLER

Yes; yes. Of course.

[*She hands it over.*]

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

La Bassée — September twenty-ninth — *your* son.

THE CALLER (*gently*)

No: yours.

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*in the same dispassionate tones*)

Mine — at Loos — October second.

THE CALLER (*in a ghastly whisper*)

What?

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

Loos — October second.

THE CALLER (*terror-stricken*)

Give me the letters. (*She snatches them from Mrs. Chepstowe's icy hand; compares them. Then, with a heart-rending cry*) Both!

MRS. CHEPSTOWE (*with quiet assent*)

Both.

THE CALLER (*dropping the letters to the floor*)

Oh, my God!

[*A pause. Quivering, the women face each other. Their hands clench nervously; their mouths are half open, as if they were beasts about to spring at each other's throats. And in the half second that has passed, both of them look older — so much older! And Mrs. Chepstowe's breath comes more quickly — and still more quickly, and the other woman faces her gaspingly, as a rabbit faces a snake. An instant's pause; then both collapse, fall into each other's arms, weeping.*]

MRS. CHEPSTOWE

You poor woman! You poor woman!

THE CURTAIN FALLS

PAWNS

Opus 44



PAWNS

The lights are extinguished. The prologue is spoken by a male voice.

Frontier! What images the mere word suggests! Barbed wire, and sentries, and eternal vigilance, even in times of peace. To the traveler, a place where certain necessary inconveniences must be encountered. To the native, the end of the world. To the statesman, an irksome demarcation, painfully cramping, encroaching, which, some day, for no reason now apparent, must be moved farther off, as a result of which various colored ribbons, jeweled badges, and sonorous titles will accrue to the said statesman, until his alien confrères, in turn, find pretexts to move the line back to the precise degree of longitude which originally marked it, or perhaps, even beyond that point. Then the whole process will commence again, and statesmen will invent new pretexts, and monarchs new color combinations for their ribbons. And in the cloistered seclusion of the colleges, anæmic professors will compile learned histories, immortalizing the statesmen, and only incidentally celebrating the rôle that their countrymen have played, these same countrymen now sepulchred in battleground, cemeteries, and so forth, under long-winded inscriptions which nine tenths of them, lately become heroes, would not have been able to decipher in life.

In accordance with treaties of peace, new frontiers will come into existence, with new sentries, new barbed wire, new vigilance.

But there are frontiers where no human sentries are needed — or possible; where, in the impenetrable depths of the marshes, bullfrogs swim across the invisible line a thousand times in the course of a day, without troubling themselves to decide whether they are German bullfrogs — or French bullfrogs — or Austrian bullfrogs — or Russian bullfrogs. And such places there are in plenty along the southwestern Russian border, where alternating hill and valley, precipice and abyss, virgin forest and unlit swamp-land have seen no sentries, save only those whom Nature placed there, since time began.

It is near one of these natural barriers that the scene is laid; a barrier almost impassable to the stranger, but an easy and accustomed path to the native, who threads its tortuous windings without fear. Indeed, he looks upon it as a most useful friend; but for it, townspeople, not so far away, would have reached out cunning hands for the few acres he cultivates with so much labor; because of it they leave him alone, him, and his similarly situated neighbors.

In the neighborhood of such places men are denationalized; are neither Russian nor Austrian, but are Volhynian — or Galician — or Podolian, without having a clear idea, in their isolation, of what the terms mean, until war comes and the Volhynian is told that the Podolian is his ally and the Galician his enemy, is given a gun, and told to glorify God

and his country by shooting straight and wasting no ammunition. . . .

The voice ceases.

Chimes.

The curtain rises in darkness.

Night: near the end of night, before morning. A forest of swampy nature. Here and there, little irregular hummocks of ground. Frogs croaking. Near the center, a small fire, with a thin, straight flame, casting but little light, so that ten feet away from it there is darkness.

Three men are grouped about the fire: Grigor, a Russian peasant in his fifties, bearded, grave, with something of the peculiar dignity which his class acquires as it ages; Stepan, his older son, enormous, powerful, bearded, stretched out full length on the ground, and the younger son, Ilia, hardly more than a boy.

A pause.

ILIA

An hour more, and it will be light. I can tell by the croaking of the frogs. It is as if they were afraid of the light. Their croaking is different. Listen!
[*A pause.*]

GRIGOR

Thirty versts more to Zawichost.

ILIA

Is it so far? That is farther than I have ever been.

GRIGOR

What of that? By nightfall we will be there.

STEPAN (*moving his huge frame lazily*)

And then, God willing, one more day, and we return home!

GRIGOR

God willing!

ILIA

Is it a large city? Will there be many people?

STEPAN (*with an indulgent smile*)

More than you have ever seen before.

ILIA

That will be wonderful!

STEPAN

There are streets; more streets than you can count, and shops, where they sell beautiful things, and great houses all built of stone.

ILIA

I shall love to see that!

GRIGOR

Not I! (*He shakes his head*) I am afraid of the cities! Oh, I am afraid of the cities! (*He addresses Stepan*) Had you not gone to the city, they would have left us alone.

STEPAN

No.

GRIGOR

They have always left us alone. Here are the marshes, and the quicksands. Who knows his way through them? Not the city people. They are far too comfortable in their stone houses.

STEPAN

Nevertheless they would have sent for us. So the police said.

GRIGOR

The police? Since when do we talk with the police? Have I not said that when an honest moujik sees

a policeman on one side of the street he crosses to the other?

STEPAN

It was no use. There were too many of them. There were police at every corner. There were signs in the street, and crowds reading the signs.

GRIGOR

Signs! Ah, yes! Signs telling you what to do! Signs telling you what not to do! But read? How should a moujik read? How to plow a straight furrow in the earth, when to sow, when to reap, how to feed his hen, his cow, that he knows, and that is far better than reading signs! Pah! Because you could not read, they told you what they pleased!

STEPAN

So I thought at first.

GRIGOR

Well?

STEPAN

Then I asked others. They all said the same.

GRIGOR

Hm! We must go to Zawichost.

STEPAN

Yes; to Zawichost.

GRIGOR

And lose three days in harvest time.

STEPAN

So they said; all of us.

GRIGOR

While Michael and lame Peter work in their field undisturbed, on the other side of the marsh! When we return, when we ask them to help us, they will

refuse; we have not helped them. (*He pauses in disgust*) If there were only a reason it would be otherwise, but for mobilization? (*With crowning contempt*) What is mobilization?

STEPAN

When I asked they pointed me out to each other; said I was a fine hulk of a man to be asking what was mobilization. They laughed at me. They threw stones at me. (*He is getting angry at the recollection*) Then I took the biggest of them by the arm — so — and I pressed a little, so that his face went white beneath the dirt, and the sweat stood out in drops on his forehead, and he begged for mercy, and the others, they stopped laughing!

ILIA (*who is listening with breathless interest*)

And then?

STEPAN

Then I came away.

[*There is a pause. Then the younger brother, who has been much impressed, takes up the conversation.*]

ILIA

You took him by the arm?

STEPAN (*smiling*)

Yes, little brother.

ILIA

With one hand only?

STEPAN

This selfsame hand. (*The boy feels the horny palm with interest*) Shall I show you?

ILIA (*darting out of his reach*)

No, no! I do not doubt you!

STEPAN (*laughing*)

For that, thanks!

ILIA

Still, if you *must* show me —

STEPAN (*with the growl of a good-natured bear*)

What?

ILIA

Wait until we come to the city to-day.

STEPAN

And then?

ILIA

Perhaps they will laugh at us —

STEPAN (*with understanding*)

Yes, little brother!

ILIA

Oh, I hope I shall see that!

[*There is a pause.*]

GRIGOR

For fifty years I have been a good Christian. I know every holiday of the orthodox church. But mobilization? That I have never heard of.

STEPAN

Perhaps the Metropolitan has decreed a new festival.

GRIGOR

In harvest time? Pah!

STEPAN

Harvest time is nothing to the people who live in cities. They know nothing of harvests.

ILIA (*suddenly*)

I hear steps.

GRIGOR

What?

ILIA

Listen!

[They listen. There is no sound.]

GRIGOR

I hear nothing.

STEPAN

The boy has quicker ears than you or I. Listen.

*[Still there is no sound.]*STEPAN (*addressing Ilia*)

What do you hear?

ILIA

Two men.

STEPAN

Which way?

ILIA

From there.

[He points towards the right.]

GRIGOR

But who should come that way? That is the way we have come. The city is in the other direction.

[A crackling of branches becomes audible.]

STEPAN

Now I hear them! Hullo! Hullo!

VOICES

Hullo! Hullo!

ILIA

Michael and lame Peter. I know their voices.

STEPAN

Hullo! This way!

GRIGOR

They will not know where we are. Guide them.

[Stepan starts off.]

ILIA

Here! A burning faggot!

STEPAN

Since when do I need a light, little brother?

[He disappears.]

GRIGOR

Michael and lame Peter? Are you sure?

ILIA *(listening)*

I hear them speaking . . . Now he has found them . . .
They are coming this way.

GRIGOR

Why should they follow us?

[Stepan reappears, followed by two more peasants who carry packs, Peter, a farmhand of twenty-two, who walks with a pronounced limp, and Michael, his employer, a robust man near Grigor's age.]

GRIGOR *(rising ceremoniously)*

Christ be with you! .

MICHAEL

Grigor Ignátievitch, Christ be with you!

GRIGOR *(as the others drop their packs and draw near to the fire)*

What brings you to the swamp at this time of night?

MICHAEL

We asked at the farm. They said you had gone this way.

PETER

We too, we go to the mobilization.

GRIGOR

You also?

ILIA

You go to Zawichost?

PETER

No; to Sandomierz.

GRIGOR

Oh! So there is mobilization in more than one place at once?

ILIA

It must be a great festival indeed.

PETER (*eagerly*)

A festival, is it then?

GRIGOR

Who knows?

MICHAEL

But that is why we followed you. We do not know what mobilization may be. But Anna Petrovna said you had gone there. We thought you would know.

GRIGOR (*shrugging his shoulders*)

Whatever it is, we will know to-day.

PETER

But now, you cannot tell us?

GRIGOR

No. (*He pauses*) Why do you go to the mobilization in Sandomierz while we go to that in Zawichost?

MICHAEL

A soldier said we were to go to Sandomierz.

STEPAN

A soldier here? In these swamps?

MICHAEL

All the way to the farm he came. We must go, he said. We were afraid to disobey.

GRIGOR

He did not tell you why you must go?

MICHAEL

He had no time. He had to tell many others.

STEPAN

And you asked him nothing?

MICHAEL

We asked. He swore, and said that if we were not gone when he passed again on his way back, we should be beaten.

[*There is a pause.*]

ILIA

And lame Peter, must he go too?

MICHAEL

I and all my men, he said. I have only the one.

ILIA

But he is lame.

PETER (*good-naturedly*)

Lame Peter will travel as far and as fast as any of them! And if there is to be a festival, why should not lame Peter be there with the others?

GRIGOR

But the harvest?

MICHAEL

Yes, the harvest!

STEPAN

When we return we will reap our fields together, and then lame Peter will have a chance to show what a worker he is!

ILIA (*abruptly*)

A sound!

[*They stop talking.*]

STEPAN

What is it?

ILIA (*listening*)

A horse.

STEPAN (*incredulously*)

A horse? This time you are wrong!

GRIGOR

What fool would try to ride a horse through the swamp?

ILIA

Now I hear it more plainly.

PETER

Perhaps it is a riderless horse.

ILIA

No. A rider is using the whip.

[*He is looking off left.*]

GRIGOR (*following his glance*)

A rider from the city?

[*The peasants look at each other. The crackling of branches becomes audible. Stepan rises silently, and goes out at the left.*]

MICHAEL

As if there were no better use for a good animal than that! To ride through the swamp, where the ground is hardly firm enough to carry a man!

PETER

And quicksands, quicksands to right and left of him! The horse knows better than his master.

[*There is the sound of a drunken voice raised in anger.*]

ILIA

Listen to him!

PETER

Swearing at his horse, as if the poor beast could do any more!

ILIA

He's afraid! I know he's afraid! He feels the earth crumbling under his hoofs! How he must tremble!
[*The sound of a whip being used unmercifully.*]

ILIA

Now he's beating him! I hope he throws him!
Oh, I hope he throws him!
[*There is a loud crash.*]

GRIGOR

He *has* thrown him!

ILIA

I knew he would!

PETER

It serves him right! To treat a good horse like that!

ILIA

And into the mud! The rider from the city in the mud! I should love to see that!
[*There is the report of a revolver. The peasants rise; look at each other in terrified inquiry.*]

GRIGOR

What was that?

MICHAEL

A shot!

ILIA

And Stepan!

PETER

Perhaps Stepan said something!

ILIA

Something the rider didn't like!

MICHAEL

He was always quick tempered, your Stepan. He

was not the man to stand there and see the horse beaten for no fault of its own.

GRIGOR (*in horror*)

Christ!

[*Stepan reënters.*

ILIA (*with a shout of relief*)

Here he comes!

GRIGOR

Stepan!

MICHAEL

What happened?

STEPAN (*briefly*)

His horse fell. It wouldn't rise again. He shot it.

ILIA

Oh!

PETER

Shot his horse!

[*At the left there enters a Russian sergeant, booted, spurred, carrying a whip. He is very muddy and very drunk.*

PETER (*repeats in horror*)

He shot his horse!

THE SERGEANT

Well, what of it? It was *my* horse, wasn't it? I could do what I wanted with it.

MICHAEL (*more mildly*)

It must have been worth many roubles.

THE SERGEANT

The rich government will pay for it. (*He stumbles nearer the fire*) Give me something to drink.

MICHAEL

What would we be doing with drink?

GRIGOR

We are only honest moujiks.

THE SERGEANT

You have nothing? Well, then —

[*He pulls a flask from a pocket, and applies it to his lips.*

STEPAN (*to Grigor, as the sergeant drinks*)

He has had too much to drink already.

GRIGOR (*shrugging his shoulders*)

A Christian is a Christian.

THE SERGEANT (*wiping his lips on his sleeve, and replacing his bottle without offering it elsewhere*)

Ah! That puts the heart in you! Make place for me at your fire, you! (*He elbows his way to a seat. The peasants edge away, so that he is alone at one side, and they together at the other*) There! That's something like.

[*There is a pause.*

GRIGOR (*courteously*)

May I ask your name?

THE SERGEANT (*warming his hands at the fire*)

What?

GRIGOR

Your name and surnames?

THE SERGEANT

Alexei Ivanovitch Liboff, Sergeant.

GRIGOR (*inclining his head*)

I am Grigor Ignátievitch Arshin. This is my son Stepan. This is my son Ilia. This is my good neighbor —

THE SERGEANT (*interrupts rudely with a drinking song*)

It isn't sleep that bows my head,

But the drink, the drink that's in it!

GRIGOR (*in amazement*)

What?

STEPAN (*starting to rise angrily*)

The boor!

GRIGOR (*laying a hand on his arm*)

A Christian is a Christian.

THE SERGEANT

I'll up and away to a distant glade!

Where the wild red raspberries grow,

And I'll meet a little Cossack girl,

A little Cossack girl from the Don!

(*He stops suddenly*) Well, why don't you say something?

GRIGOR

It is not for us to speak in the presence of your excellency.

THE SERGEANT

Then my excellency graciously grants you permission.

(*He rises, bows grotesquely, stumbles, falls*)

I'll meet a little Cossack girl,

A little Cossack girl from the Don!

(*He stops; points at Ilia*) You, speak! (*Ilia remains silent. He points at Stepan*) You! (*Stepan folds his arms and glares. He points at Grigor*) You, old man! Are you all a pack of fools?

GRIGOR

Your excellency has traveled far?

THE SERGEANT

My excellency has traveled far. Through these cursed swamps on a stumbling horse all the way from Zawichost.

STEPAN (*involuntarily*)

From Zawichost?

THE SERGEANT

Have I not said so? All the way from Zawichost, since eleven o'clock this morning.

STEPAN (*starting to put the question which is uppermost in all their minds*)

Perhaps, then —

[*He breaks off.*]

THE SERGEANT

Perhaps what?

GRIGOR

Perhaps your excellency can tell us something of the mobilization?

THE SERGEANT (*yawning*)

The mobilization, oh, yes.

ILIA

It is a festival, is it not?

THE SERGEANT (*shutting his mouth with a surprised snap*)

What?

GRIGOR

A festival of the holy church?

THE SERGEANT

Who told you that? (*He laughs loudly*) A festival of the church!

MICHAEL (*somewhat nettled*)

What, then, is the mobilization?

THE SERGEANT

You don't know?

PETER

How should we? We live far from the cities.

THE SERGEANT

Then why do you go there?

MICHAEL

We do as we are told.

THE SERGEANT (*very drunkenly*)

Quite right! Do as you are told! Obey orders!
That's the way for a moujik!

GRIGOR

But what is mobilization?

THE SERGEANT (*turning on him*)

Mobilization is this: they stand you up in rows, the big men in back, and the little men in front. Then they put guns in your hands, and you shoot.

ILIA

I should love to shoot.

MICHAEL

But we don't know how.

THE SERGEANT

That doesn't matter. They teach you.

STEPAN

We shoot. Very well, what then? When we have shot do we go home?

THE SERGEANT

Oh, no! It only begins so. When you have shot, you march. Then they stand you up in rows again, and you shoot some more.

MICHAEL

What do you shoot at?

ILIA

Targets?

THE SERGEANT

Better than that!

PETER

Animals?

THE SERGEANT

Still better than that! (*He pauses for his effect*)
How would you like to shoot at men?

ILIA

Shoot at men?

MICHAEL

What have they done that they should be shot at?

GRIGOR

What have we done that we should shoot at them?

THE SERGEANT (*amused*)

You don't believe me?

[*He laughs; produces his bottle, drinks again.*]

STEPAN (*to Grigor*)

He is very drunk. He doesn't know what he is saying.

PETER (*with a sudden laugh*)

I have found it!

THE SERGEANT

What have you found?

PETER

I have found the trick! You shoot at men, yes, but not with real bullets!

THE SERGEANT (*laughing, as the others laugh, but for a different reason*)

Not with real bullets? Wait a minute. (*He fumbles in his bandolier*) Here's one of them!

[*He tosses them a loaded cartridge.*]

MICHAEL (*while they all examine it with curiosity*)

What is it?

THE SERGEANT

Give it to me. (*He demonstrates*) This is full of powder. The hammer strikes here, and the powder explodes. And this — this — (*he bites it out*) — is the bullet.

[*He passes it to them.*]

ILIA

What a cruel thing!

PETER

How heavy it is!

GRIGOR

And is this what we shoot at men?

THE SERGEANT

Bullets like this — and bigger.

GRIGOR

But if we hit them?

THE SERGEANT

What?

GRIGOR (*repeating his question*)

If we hit them?

THE SERGEANT

You want to hit them.

GRIGOR

And hurt them?

THE SERGEANT

You want to hurt them.

GRIGOR

Or even — kill them?

THE SERGEANT (*reaching his climax*)

You want to kill them!

[*The peasants look at one another blankly. The*

sergeant is immensely pleased with the impression he has produced.

STEPAN

We are peaceable moujiks.

MICHAEL

We want to kill nobody.

PETER

They must have sent for the wrong men. They could not have wanted us.

GRIGOR (*voicing the general opinion*)

We, we want to kill no man. For fifty years I have been a good Christian. I have killed nothing except that which I was to eat; I and my children. We do not eat men; we do not kill men.

THE SERGEANT

All right, then. You will learn how.

GRIGOR

I do not wish to learn how.

THE SERGEANT

So they say in the beginning. So was I in the beginning. The first time you pull your trigger, the first time you see a strong man fall, you are afraid, oh, you are afraid! But then the lust of killing sweeps over you, and you shoot, and shoot, while the metal of your gun burns the flesh of your hands, and you scream with joy, and are glad, and you kill! You kill!

GRIGOR

Far rather would I be killed myself!

THE SERGEANT

That may happen also!

[*He drinks.*]

STEPAN (*to Grigor*)

He lies.

MICHAEL

He is a soldier. Soldiers always lie.

ILIA

And he is drunk! Pah!

GRIGOR (*to the sergeant, as he corks his bottle*)

These men, whom we shoot at —

[*He stops.*]

THE SERGEANT

Yes?

GRIGOR

They have stolen? They have murdered?

[*The sergeant laughs.*]

GRIGOR (*patiently*)

They must be great criminals. What crime have they done?

THE SERGEANT

No crime.

GRIGOR

Then why do they let us shoot at them?

THE SERGEANT

They do not *let* you.

GRIGOR

No?

THE SERGEANT

You shoot.

GRIGOR

And what do they do?

THE SERGEANT

They shoot also.

GRIGOR

At us?

THE SERGEANT

Where else, then? They are the enemy.

GRIGOR

But we, we have no enemy.

THE SERGEANT

You will learn otherwise. These men, these men whom you shoot at and who shoot at you, they are your enemy.

[*There is a pause. The peasants exchange signs of incredulity.*]

ILIA (*reflectively*)

To shoot, that is not so bad. But to be shot at, that I should not like at all!

GRIGOR (*silencing him*)

And who are these men?

PETER (*sarcastically*)

Yes, our enemies, who are they?

THE SERGEANT (*waving his hand*)

Prussians. Germans. Austrians.

GRIGOR

And what are Prussians? — Germans? — Austrians?

THE SERGEANT

Men who live on the other side of the border. Men who live on the other side of the swamps.

GRIGOR

On the other side of the swamps? (*He glances meaningly at Michael and Peter*) What do you mean?

THE SERGEANT (*growing drunkenly expansive*)

Well, you see, here is Russia, (*a gesture to the left*)

here are the swamps, (*a gesture in front*) that is, the border, and there is Austria. (*A gesture to the right*) Here we are. There is the enemy.

[*Rather unaccountably the peasants begin to laugh, a hearty laugh of relief, as if the sergeant has finally exposed the falsehood of everything that he has said by venturing upon a glaringly untrue statement.*]

THE SERGEANT (*irritated*)

Well, what are you laughing at?

MICHAEL

A good joke!

PETER

Yes, a fine joke!

MICHAEL

A liar! Such a liar as there never was!

STEPAN

When a man has had too much to drink he should stay home!

GRIGOR (*relaxing his dignity*)

And for a time we believed him! We believed him!

THE SERGEANT

What?

STEPAN

. Instead of telling lies to honest moujiks —

THE SERGEANT (*interrupting*)

What do you mean?

PETER

We (*indicating Michael*), we live on the other side of the swamps!

THE SERGEANT

Well, what of it?

MICHAEL

We are going to the mobilization also!

THE SERGEANT (*with superiority*)

Here is the border line. But the line bends.

PETER

You said they shot at us! Because we lived on the other side of the swamps! Old Grigor, and Stepan, and Ilia! They shoot at us!

STEPAN (*laughing*)

Rather would we shoot at you, Alexei Ivanovitch!

THE SERGEANT (*growing angry*)

Laugh, if you like! Laugh, but to-morrow, when you reach Zawichost, when you find that I am your superior officer, then *I* laugh!

PETER

To Zawichost? But we do not go there!

MICHAEL

We go to Sandomierz!

THE SERGEANT (*thunderstruck*)

To Sandomierz!

PETER (*snapping his fingers at him*)

Where you are *not* my superior officer!

THE SERGEANT (*with sudden awakening*)

No, that I am not! But you, you are the enemy!

PETER

What?

ILIA

Did you hear what he said?

STEPAN (*laughing scornfully*)

The enemy?

MICHAEL

When we have tilled our fields together?

THE SERGEANT (*balancing himself with difficulty*)

Sandomierz, that is in Austria!

GRIGOR (*disregarding him*)

Enemies! When we live a single verst apart from each other!

MICHAEL

When we have helped each other with the harvest, aye, since we were children!

THE SERGEANT (*shouting*)

We are Russians! You are Austrians! There is war between us! (*He draws his revolver*) I command you to surrender.

PETER (*mimicking him, dancing up and down in front of him*)

I command you to surrender!

THE SERGEANT

Surrender!

PETER

Listen to the drunken fool! Surrender!

[*The Sergeant shoots. Peter falls. There is a sudden and dreadful pause.*]

STEPAN (*laying his hand over Peter's heart*)

Dead! Dead as his horse!

GRIGOR (*rising to his feet like a prophet of old*)

Are we men or are we beasts of the field?

THE SERGEANT (*turning triumphantly on Michael*)

Now, you Austrian swine, will you surrender?

[*But Stepan is already advancing upon him, breathing deep, slowly, massively, like some awful engine of destruction. At first the Sergeant does not see him, but something in the expression of the others warns him. He wheels.*]

THE SERGEANT

Back! Stop where you are!

[Stepan continues grimly, his great hands rising slowly from his sides.]

THE SERGEANT *(in an ecstasy of fear)*

Back, I say!

[He fires.]

Stepan shakes himself, as if stung by a hornet, and throws his towering bulk upon the sergeant. There is a sigh of satisfaction from the moujik as his fingers lock about his adversary's throat. And there is a scream from the Sergeant, a scream ending in a choke The struggling figures fall outside of the circle of light. For a moment there is a threshing, as when some small animal is caught in a trap. Then quiet.

GRIGOR *(almost sobbing)*

And not so long ago I thought it was easier to be killed than to kill!

MICHAEL *(with staring eyes)*

Murder! That I have lived to see a murder!

ILIA

Lame Peter! Poor lame Peter!

[There is a pause. Then Stepan rises, holding the Sergeant's revolver between two fingers.]

STEPAN

What shall I do with this?

GRIGOR *(raising his head)*

What?

[Stepan hands him the revolver.]

GRIGOR

Pah!

[He flings it away. A pause.]

ILIA (*in a trembling voice*)

I so wanted to see you use your strength, and now that I have seen it — how horrible it is, how horrible!

[*Stepan does not reply. Instead, he turns to Grigor.*]

STEPAN

The bodies?

GRIGOR

The swamp will swallow them up.

[*Stepan beckons to Ilia. Silently they raise Peter's body, carry it out at the back. They return.*]

GRIGOR (*rises, bows his head, folds his hands. The others follow his example*)

May we all be happy. May the dead reach God's kingdom. May we all be preserved in good health. Amen.

[*The others repeat the Amen. He makes the sign of the cross. The others follow his example. A little light begins to filter through the trees.*]

GRIGOR (*turning to Michael*)

And now, you on your way, we on ours.

MICHAEL

Farewell, brother.

GRIGOR

Brother, farewell!

[*Michael takes up two packs, his own, and Peter's; goes out at the back.*]

Grigor, Stepan, Ilia, take up their own packs, go out at the left.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

IN THE RAVINE

Opus 47



IN THE RAVINE

A snowy ravine in the Italian Alps. Everything is white. Even in the background, and at the sides, the sky is shut out by the perpendicular cliff sides. And every few seconds, a gust of wind, scooping through the length of the little hollow, fills the air with whirling clouds of snow.

From above, sounds of fighting: the discharge of small arms; the rattle of machine guns; and, at intervals, the deeper reports of mountain artillery. Mixed in with it all, shouts, screams, human voices . . .

The sounds of the invisible combat in the sky grow in volume, and suddenly, from above, a large rectangular object, indistinguishable for the snow which covers it, bounds down the slope facing us, to fall noiselessly into the deeper snow at its base.

The firing grows louder; then diminishes. It appears that one side has scored a victory; that it is driving its opponent off in confusion. The noise dies out in the distance.

Presently we observe that the fallen object is alive; it moves, separates into two parts, two soldiers, an Austrian and an Italian, both somewhat stunned by their fall.

The Austrian is the first to rise to his feet. He looks at the wall of white which hems him in, then at the prostrate Italian at his feet, takes in the situation, and laughs — laughs Homericly. But in the middle of his laugh he stops suddenly: attempts to move his left arm: utters an

ejaculation of pain: investigates with the uninjured member, cursing softly as he does so.

THE ITALIAN (*an urbane little man of obvious refinement, sitting up, and watching with more than lay interest*)
Broken?

THE AUSTRIAN

I don't know. It hurts like the devil.

THE ITALIAN (*rising*)

Let me see it.

[*He approaches.*

THE AUSTRIAN

I can't move it. (*With sudden suspicion, as the Italian nears*) No, you don't!

THE ITALIAN (*smiling*)

Oh, I shan't hurt you!

THE AUSTRIAN

Your word? (*He breaks off, with renewed suspicion*)

That's what I thought up there.

[*He attempts to gesticulate with the injured arm — stops with a sharp intake of breath.*

THE ITALIAN

I don't understand.

THE AUSTRIAN (*rubbing his shoulder tenderly*)

When it came to the hand-to-hand struggle —

THE ITALIAN

Yes?

THE AUSTRIAN

I took one look at you. I thought I should break you in two.

THE ITALIAN

Indeed?

THE AUSTRIAN

You're such a little fellow. Why, I could make two of you! Then you did something to me — Phew!

THE ITALIAN (*explaining politely*)

Pressed on the brachial plexus.

THE AUSTRIAN

The what? How?

THE ITALIAN (*with professorial pleasure*)

The brachial plexus. Where the brachial nerve passes through the axilla, and forms a plexus near the neck of the humerus.

THE AUSTRIAN (*not understanding in the least*)

Yes, I suppose that was it.

THE ITALIAN

You don't follow? Let me show you.

[*He approaches again.*]

THE AUSTRIAN (*backing away hastily*)

No, no! The recollection is sufficiently vivid. (*Looking at him fearfully*) You've done it before?

THE ITALIAN (*expansively*)

Oh, often! On a guinea pig it will produce complete insensibility in a minute. (*Parenthetically*) That is, with simultaneous compression of the vagus. On a large dog, two minutes and a quarter. On an ox, four minutes. Surprising, isn't it?

THE AUSTRIAN

Hm! And what did you take *me* for? A dog or an ox?

THE ITALIAN (*with a simple smile*)

You? Neither. An enemy. (*Wistfully*) I had always wanted to try it on a man, but I had never done it. It's too painful.

THE AUSTRIAN

So I observe.

[*A pause. They smile. Then, realizing the humor of the situation, they laugh openly.*]

THE ITALIAN

Now, will you let me look at your arm?

THE AUSTRIAN

If you will be so good.

[*The Italian takes his left hand and rotates the arm. The Austrian exclaims.*]

THE ITALIAN

Hurt? (*The Austrian nods*) Much? (*Another nod*)
It's not broken.

THE AUSTRIAN

Not broken? Why, it's broken in a hundred places.

THE ITALIAN (*touching his armpit*)

The pain is worst here, isn't it?

THE AUSTRIAN

Ouch! Yes.

THE ITALIAN (*dropping the arm*)

You have me to thank for that.

THE AUSTRIAN

I don't follow.

THE ITALIAN (*lightly*)

After effect. (*He waves his hand*) That's all.

THE AUSTRIAN (*with vast expressiveness*)

Oh! Only that?

THE ITALIAN

It'll wear off by and by. Try and be patient. (*He opens a cigarette case*) Smoke?

THE AUSTRIAN

No, thanks. (*Watching the Italian with undisguised*

interest) Would you mind telling me — where you learned that?

THE ITALIAN (*lighting his cigarette*)

What?

THE AUSTRIAN

That — that — that little accomplishment of yours —
[*He indicates his arm.*

THE ITALIAN

That? Oh, that's part of my business.

THE AUSTRIAN

Your business? What are you? A wrestler?

THE ITALIAN (*laughing lightly*)

A wrestler? Hardly that!

THE AUSTRIAN

A pugilist?

THE ITALIAN

Ha! Is this the hand of the man who makes his living by his fists? Is this the forehead of the prize fighter?

THE AUSTRIAN

Then a torturer of the Inquisition?

THE ITALIAN (*shaking his head*)

Thanks for the compliment — but I am strictly modern. (*Simply*) I am a professor in the University of Padua.

THE AUSTRIAN (*incredulously*)

A professor?

THE ITALIAN

Yes. Of biology.

THE AUSTRIAN

Then why aren't you in the medical corps?

THE ITALIAN

I am not a physician — and I wanted to see action.
It's the truth. (*As the Austrian stares at him, he announces his name with a little bow*) I am Carlo Verani.

THE AUSTRIAN (*repeating the name as if hypnotized*)
Carlo Verani?

THE ITALIAN (*obviously pleased*) I take it you have heard of me?

THE AUSTRIAN (*flatly*)
No; I can't say I have.

THE ITALIAN (*anxiously*)
My monograph on the phylogenetic development of fresh water crustaceans?

THE AUSTRIAN
Crustaceans?

THE ITALIAN
You must have heard of it. And my magnum opus on parthenogenesis in the sea urchin?
[*The Austrian shakes his head firmly.*]

THE ITALIAN (*despairingly*)
You don't know it? Why, every year for the past twenty I have had something new to give the world.

THE AUSTRIAN
Your work, professor, has nothing to do with *my* business.

THE ITALIAN
Oh. (*Perfunctorily*) What is your business?
[*The Austrian bursts into laughter.*]

THE ITALIAN
Is it as funny as that?

THE AUSTRIAN

Permit me to introduce myself. I am Fritz Schönbrunn.

THE ITALIAN (*trying to recall*)

Fritz Schönbrunn?

THE AUSTRIAN

You have heard the name?

THE ITALIAN

It has a familiar sound. And you say it as if I should have heard it.

THE AUSTRIAN

I am a man at the top of my profession!

THE ITALIAN

Indeed? I congratulate you. And that profession?

THE AUSTRIAN (*smiling and pausing*)

A minute ago you asked me to look at your hand. Now look at mine.

THE ITALIAN

Well?

THE AUSTRIAN

Those finely modeled outlines; those flexible, supple muscles; those long, sensitive fingers; do they say nothing to you?

THE ITALIAN

An artist, of course.

THE AUSTRIAN

Of course. But what kind of an artist?

THE ITALIAN (*examining the hand*)

Violinist? (*The Austrian shakes his head*) Pianist?
(*Another shake of the head*) Not a musician?

THE AUSTRIAN

Except in so far as every Austrian is a musician.

THE ITALIAN
Sculptor?

THE AUSTRIAN
No.

THE ITALIAN
Painter?

THE AUSTRIAN
That's better!

THE ITALIAN
Not a painter, but allied with painting?

THE AUSTRIAN
Yes.

THE ITALIAN
Then an etcher!

THE AUSTRIAN
Nearly right! Very nearly right!

THE ITALIAN (*amused*)
Well, then?

THE AUSTRIAN (*with simple pride*)
I am a forger!

THE ITALIAN (*somewhat upset*)
I — I beg your pardon.

THE AUSTRIAN
A forger. Not the man who works in the sweat of his brow, if you please, but the man who produces more valuable articles: checks, notes, promises to pay, letters of credit, bills of exchange, all that sort of thing.

THE ITALIAN
O — Oh! How interesting!

THE AUSTRIAN (*with a deliberate copy of the professor's manner*) You must have heard of the celebrated million kronen forgery?

THE ITALIAN (*unconvincingly*)
Of course!

THE AUSTRIAN

Why, the Baron went on the stand and swore that it was his signature on the note: that he didn't remember signing it, but that there was no doubt about the signature! *I* did that! And then the check I raised from eight to eighty thousand, and when the cashier was suspicious, forged an indorsement, and got the money! And the jewels of the Countess Potocka, which the jeweler delivered to me on her written order — which she has not *yet* been able to prove was a forgery!

THE ITALIAN (*for the sake of saying something*)

You seem to have had a busy life.

THE AUSTRIAN

Busy? Overcrowded! Always something new to give to the world — just like yourself.

THE ITALIAN

Yes; I was about to remark it.

THE AUSTRIAN

Both of us professional men, eh? Both of us followers of the liberal arts?

THE ITALIAN (*regaining something of his equilibrium*)

At different distances!

THE AUSTRIAN (*nodding and smiling*),

But followers, nevertheless!

[*He blows a kiss into the air.*]

THE ITALIAN (*chuckling*)

Why the kiss?

THE AUSTRIAN

That? (*Blowing another*) For the Muse!

[*Shots are heard in the distance.*

THE ITALIAN (*gesticulating*)

They're still fighting.

THE AUSTRIAN

Yes . . . (*Coming back to earth suddenly*) I regret to change the subject —

THE ITALIAN (*nodding shrewdly*)

You were talking about yourself.

THE AUSTRIAN (*smiling*)

Even in that case. (*He takes a step forward*) Professor, you are my prisoner!

THE ITALIAN (*undismayed*)

Your prisoner?

THE AUSTRIAN

Just that.

THE ITALIAN

Oh! Then your arm must be all right again!

THE AUSTRIAN

Quite recovered, thank you. (*He points*) I captured you up there.

THE ITALIAN

Hm! And brought me down here for safe-keeping? Yes?

THE AUSTRIAN (*grinning*)

Well —

THE ITALIAN

Oh, I recall distinctly that you said something about my surrendering — or words to that effect.

THE AUSTRIAN

You admit it!

THE ITALIAN

Of course! But I don't remember that I surrendered. Instead, (*he indicates his armpit with an eloquent gesture*) I made use of my anatomical knowledge, and the next thing I knew —

[*He breaks off.*]

THE AUSTRIAN

Yes?

THE ITALIAN (*continuing his sentence*)

I was laboring under the delusion that you were *my* prisoner!

[*He advances stealthily upon the Austrian.*]

THE AUSTRIAN (*observing his approach; suddenly drawing a sword bayonet*)

Stand off!

THE ITALIAN

Oh! (*He follows his example leisurely*) You see, I have one also.

THE AUSTRIAN

Your tricks won't help you now!

THE ITALIAN

No?

THE AUSTRIAN

In bayonet fighting it's a matter of skill with a point!

THE ITALIAN (*smiling sweetly*)

Oh! You imagine it's a pen!

THE AUSTRIAN (*laughing, despite himself*)

What of that?

THE ITALIAN

Don't forget! I am an expert with the lancet!
(He describes geometrical designs with the point of his bayonet)

THE AUSTRIAN *(watching him critically)*

Your hand isn't steady. You smoke too many cigarettes. I never smoke.

THE ITALIAN

Hm! *You* need a steady hand, don't you?

THE AUSTRIAN

What?

THE ITALIAN

In your profession?

THE AUSTRIAN *(smiling)*

When a mistake means jail? Emphatically! *(He swings his arms vigorously to restore the circulation)*
Are you ready?

THE ITALIAN *(without moving)*

When you are.

THE AUSTRIAN

Well then, on guard!

THE ITALIAN

Wait a minute! Wait a minute!

THE AUSTRIAN

What do you want?

THE ITALIAN

Think! Stop and think!

THE AUSTRIAN

Well?

THE ITALIAN *(in his best professorial manner)*

Either you will kill me or I will kill you.

THE AUSTRIAN

Preferably the former.

THE ITALIAN (*nodding*)

According to the point of view. And then?

THE AUSTRIAN

What do you mean?

THE ITALIAN

The survivor — who will probably be wounded — what will happen to him?

THE AUSTRIAN

The survivor will rejoin his regiment.

THE ITALIAN

Yes? (*Waving his arms graphically*) By flying there, doubtless?

THE AUSTRIAN (*thunderstruck*)

I never thought of that.

THE ITALIAN (*seating himself comfortably, and lighting a cigarette*)

Well, think of it now.

THE AUSTRIAN (*examining the walls which hem them in*)

It's only thirty feet to the top.

THE ITALIAN (*blowing smoke rings into the air*)

Thirty feet — more or less.

THE AUSTRIAN

And it's easy enough to climb out here.

[*He indicates a point at the back.*]

THE ITALIAN

Yes. I noticed that ten minutes ago.

THE AUSTRIAN (*continuing his explorations*)

Or here!

THE ITALIAN

Or anywhere — if one is unwounded. To the wounded

man those thirty feet represent the distance between life and death — and so far as concerns him, they might as well be thirty miles. (*With a pleasant smile*)
 Either we climb out unwounded — or not at all.

THE AUSTRIAN (*with a broad grin*)

Well, after you!

THE ITALIAN (*laughing*)

I couldn't think of taking precedence!

THE AUSTRIAN

There is no reason to stand on ceremony.

THE ITALIAN (*shaking his head gently*)

Pressed flat against the cliff side, holding on with hands and feet, I am afraid the temptation to pin me fast — like a butterfly on a card — might be too much for you.

THE AUSTRIAN (*testing the point of his bayonet thoughtfully*)

Would be too much for me.

THE ITALIAN (*amicably*)

Just as I thought! Now, if *you* want to go first —

THE AUSTRIAN

I would not be so disrespectful, professor!

[*He returns to a position facing the Italian; seats himself, his bayonet resting across his knees.*]

THE ITALIAN (*stating the problem smilingly*)

It's the simplest thing under the sun. Neither of us dares climb out.

THE AUSTRIAN

No.

THE ITALIAN

If we fight, the survivor will either freeze — or

starve — unless he is lucky enough to die of his wounds.

THE AUSTRIAN

And if we don't fight —

THE ITALIAN

Then both of us.

THE AUSTRIAN

Quite so.

THE ITALIAN (*after a rather serious pause, chuckling at the thought*)

I warn you —

THE AUSTRIAN

Yes?

THE ITALIAN

I am accustomed to late hours.

THE AUSTRIAN

What of that?

THE ITALIAN

You will probably fall asleep first.

THE AUSTRIAN (*laughing*)

How you think of everything! And if I *should* fall asleep —

THE ITALIAN (*rubbing his hands, and gazing innocently at a point in the distance*)

If you *should* fall asleep —

THE AUSTRIAN

You would proceed —

THE ITALIAN

Immediately —

THE AUSTRIAN

Or even sooner — (*choosing his words carefully*) — to dissect me.

THE ITALIAN

With the greatest pleasure!

THE AUSTRIAN

And the greatest expertness! (*The Italian raises his hand in modest protest*) The expertness which one might expect of a professor in the University of Bologna!

THE ITALIAN (*correcting him*)

Padua.

THE AUSTRIAN

I beg your pardon?

THE ITALIAN

The University of Padua.

THE AUSTRIAN

Ah, yes! Careless of me. (*He resumes the subject*) That is what would happen if I fell asleep. But you don't imagine that my masterpieces were executed in a few minutes, or even in a few hours? I have worked three days and nights on a difficult signature!

THE ITALIAN

Oh!

THE AUSTRIAN

The work is sufficient inspiration in itself to keep me awake. I always carry paper and a fountain pen with me. I shall practise.

THE ITALIAN

Oh!

THE AUSTRIAN

I shall combine business with pleasure. When I leave here it will be with a million kronen worth of new forgeries!

THE ITALIAN

Hm! Executed in the dark!

THE AUSTRIAN

What do you mean?

THE ITALIAN

I take it that an ability to see in the dark is *not* one of your unusual accomplishments?

THE AUSTRIAN (*biting his lip*)

No.

THE ITALIAN

There will be no moon to-night.

THE AUSTRIAN

Oh! So that's the case!

THE ITALIAN (*with an expressive gesture*)

There will be a game of blind man's buff.

THE AUSTRIAN

And quite probably no winner at all.

THE ITALIAN

Quite probably. (*There is a pause; they look at each other seriously*) If we fight — if we kill each other, our lives simply cancel.

THE AUSTRIAN

Yes.

THE ITALIAN

Still it is necessary for us to fight.

THE AUSTRIAN

We are enemies.

THE ITALIAN

Our countries — yours and mine — are at war.

THE AUSTRIAN

To let each other go is out of the question.

THE ITALIAN

Altogether.

THE AUSTRIAN

And for one of us to surrender —

THE ITALIAN (*proudly*)

Not I!

THE AUSTRIAN

Why not? Isn't your life valuable to your country?

THE ITALIAN

Not as valuable as my death can be. I am an educated man. It is my duty to set an example.

THE AUSTRIAN

Example? To these four walls?

THE ITALIAN

To myself, if you please: because my self-respect, because all of the training that has gone to make me what I am, does not permit me to save my skin in any other way!

THE AUSTRIAN

Well spoken, professor!

THE ITALIAN

And you! You are not thinking of example?

THE AUSTRIAN (*lightly*)

Why not? A thief once died on a cross.

THE ITALIAN

Is *that* why?

THE AUSTRIAN (*shaking his head*)

Fashions are not set by criminals.

THE ITALIAN

Well, then?

THE AUSTRIAN (*shamefacedly at first; then with growing exaltation*)

Well, then, this country of mine, this country which has hounded me from one city to another, which has released me from one jail but to clap me into the next, which has set a reward upon my head and its police at my heels, damn it all, I love my country!

THE ITALIAN

Well spoken, criminal! (*He pauses*) Fight it is. We will climb together — you over there, I here. We will reach the top together. Then, when we have reached the top —

THE AUSTRIAN

To the death, professor!

THE ITALIAN

To the death!

[*They move toward the indicated places, watching each other furtively. Suddenly the Italian breaks into a peculiar laugh.*]

THE AUSTRIAN

Well?

THE ITALIAN

I am thinking: what a fate, if I, professor of biology, am slain by a forger!

THE AUSTRIAN

No worse than mine: the greatest forger of the twentieth century to be slain by a professor — and of biology!

[*They laugh.*]

THE ITALIAN (*sharply*)

Are you ready?

THE AUSTRIAN

Yes!

THE ITALIAN

Then — to our next meeting!

[Both men come to attention; salute. Then, facing about, they begin to climb rapidly.]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

VALKYRIE!

Opus 42

VALKYRIE!

The lights are extinguished.

The prologue is spoken by a male voice.

The curtain rises upon the first words.

Until the prologue is finished the lighting shows the upper half of the scene only.

It is night — night between the battles.

Before us, a level plain. Dotted it, disfiguring it, most hideously marring it, the wounded, the dying, the dead. Paralleling each other, on either side, running onward as far as the sight of the eye will reach, trenches hastily — but scientifically — dug in the clayey mud. And in them, cursing the freezing water which is up to their knees, cursing the vermin which swarms unmolested about them, but cursing each other most of all, men, many men, ready to die, expecting to die, some of them hoping to die. A little while ago and they were tradesmen, professors, students of philosophy, thieves. Now pleb and patrician, scum and upper crust, mingle quite amiably, considering the circumstances, fight shoulder to shoulder, quarrel as equals, and are buried, when their turn comes, in a company vastly unbecoming their caste, rank, social position.

Quiet — but a fearful quiet punctuated by the groans of those whose sufferings have passed the point of endurance. For the narrow rectangle which shifts

weekly a few yards in either direction is a vial of agony — and overflows.

Overhead, an occasional rift in the wind-driven clouds lets through a pale, shuddering beam of moonlight.

In the distance, coming into sight, and melting into blackness as the scurrying clouds separate and come together again, looms the tottering spire of a ruined church. Here, not so long past, country people in blouses and sabots prayed that their Maker would guard them from “war, pestilence, and sudden death.” Here, a month ago, men wearing flat-topped caps prayed that that same Maker would destroy other men wearing spiked helmets, and here, a week later, the men of the spiked helmets prayed for the destruction of them of the flat-topped caps. And even as in olden times the heathen disfigured the idol who failed to comply with his request, so the men of the caps and the men of the helmets and the men who once wore blouses have alternated between supplication and bombardment, between hymns and high explosives.

The ear of their common Deity has been assailed indifferently by the voice of the chorister and the voice of the cannon, but remaining apparently deaf, His house bears the marks of savage violence. So that now it has become unsafe to offer prayer in the shattered edifice, and, as in the beginning, the Master is again addressed in the open fields, with sacrifice, with fire, and with burnt offering. In the distance the church, builded by the love of man in times of peace, unbuilted by the hate of man in times of war, silhouettes murkily against the livid background.

But here, under the uncertain moonlight, God is near to His children, and beyond the clouds lie the stars.
The voice ceases.

A little light is permitted to reach the lower part of the scene.

There is a long pause.

Suddenly, barely a dozen yards away, a dim figure struggles to its feet, and a faltering voice intones the first words of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, Which art in Heaven . . ." A hundred feet to the right a single rifle speaks. A momentary flash, a crackling report, which echoes into instant silence, and the trembling figure collapses limply, sagging oddly in unexpected places — like a torn bag of oats — and the prayer remains unfinished. From the English trenches, a hundred feet to the left, half a dozen rifles yelp in answer, aiming at the flash. And again there is silence.

In the foreground, quite near to us, so close that his sudden discovery by a wandering moonbeam startles us, a wounded German officer, inconspicuously propping himself up on the knapsack which he has taken from the body of a dead soldier, speaks unemotionally.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Narr!

A BRITISH OFFICER (*also wounded; some five feet away*)

I beg your pardon?

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*speaking in perfect English*)

Oh! You're still alive?

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*nodding*)

Yes — still alive.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

An hour more or less — what does it matter?

[*There is a pause.*

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*shifting an inch painfully*)

What was it you said before?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

That poor fool down there — you saw him?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

No. My head was turned the other way.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

He stood up.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Stood up?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

With a hundred men waiting for a target.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

They got him?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

The first shot.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Killed, I suppose.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

For his sake, I hope so.

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*after a pause*)

God rest his soul!

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Hm! (*A thoughtful silence*) Amen.

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*after another pause*)

Have a cigarette?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

What?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Here; in the pocket of my tunic. I can't reach them.

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*laughing softly*)

A cigarette? With my men watching, you would never finish lighting it.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

I didn't think of that.

[*He is silent.*]

THE GERMAN OFFICER

We Germans smoke pipes; German pipes, with metal lids. You can't see the fire in the bowl a foot away. Your men smoke cigarettes. We can see them from our trenches.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Well?

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*shrugging his shoulders*)

At night — we aim a trifle higher than the glow. (*He waves his hand expressively*) Then — sometimes — the cigarette goes out.

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*after a pause*)

German efficiency.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Thoroughness in all things.

[*He nods gravely.*]

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*with a shudder*)

But horrible to think of! The fighting over. Starlight — and darkness — and thoughts of home. And suddenly a crash — a bullet through bone and tissue — and thought ends!

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*smiling patiently*)

Horrible, you think?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

To die in fair fight; to see the face of your enemy — that's another thing! But at night! Perhaps when you're smiling over your last letter from home, your mind full of pictures which have nothing to do with war! Your body in the trenches, but your thoughts a thousand miles away! And then — then — !

A VOICE FROM THE GROUND (*a faint voice, with something of a fine poetic fervor in it*)

Then — the Valkyrie!

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*starting violently*)

What?

THE SAME SPEAKER (*a fair-haired lad of twenty-six or seven; a German private soldier*)

Then the Valkyrie, who comes to carry the soul of the dead hero to Valhalla!

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*blankly*)

Valhalla? Valhalla in the twentieth century?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Hist!

[*For the benefit of the British Officer he touches his finger to his forehead in an expressive gesture.*]

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Oh!

[*The soldier has relapsed into his former stupor. The officers look at him curiously.*]

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*sotto voce*)

Last night he was one of a rescue party that tried to bring me back. They failed.

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*horrified at the thought*)

And you've been here two nights?

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*with the suggestion of a laugh*)

Two? Three.

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*appalled*)

Good Lord!

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*with polite interest*)

You're not used to that kind of thing, are you?

(*The British Officer shakes his head*) Thought so.

Volunteer?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Yes. Landed three weeks ago.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Well, men get used to anything — when it's necessary.

(*He pauses, to continue impersonally*) It's not easy

to move me, that's the trouble. My thigh is broken

— a piece of shrapnel, I think — or they would have

brought me back the first night.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

They tried?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Of course. (*He pauses*) A sound louder than an

ordinary speaking voice would have been fatal, and

when they try to move you — and your thigh is

broken — sometimes it's beyond endurance. (*He*

pauses again) Last night they would have succeeded.

They brought along morphine, and they gave me a

hypodermic. Only the moon came out at the

wrong time. They had to go back — and they left

the boy behind.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Badly wounded?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

I don't know . . . He's been quiet all day.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

I saw him, but I thought he was dead. (*He pauses, to look at the soldier with a new feeling of interest*)
Young, isn't he?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Yes.

[*There is a pause.*]

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*shaking his head*)

So little gained!

THE GERMAN OFFICER

What do you mean?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

If they had succeeded in bringing you back, it might have been worth while. As it is, simply another life thrown away.

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*patiently*)

The attempt was worth making, wasn't it?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

To rescue your officer? Yes.

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*simply*)

It is far better to fail than not to try.

[*There is a pause.*]

THE SOLDIER (*speaking again in his delirium*)

In the old days, sword and buckler. To-day, poison gas and rapid-fire guns. But above it all, far above the battles, the Valkyrie! The Valkyrie!

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*with a touch of contempt*)

The credo of the Hun.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

It impresses you that way?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Like the Moslem — looking forward to Paradise — and the Houris.

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*critically*)

Houris and Valkyries? Not much similarity.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Even then?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

What is *your* faith?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

The faith of a Christian.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Heaven? A peaceful heaven?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

So I trust.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

What a lot of fighting you are doing to get there!

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*with the shadow of a smile*)

But if it is worth the fighting?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Clouds? Fog? Thousands of Englishmen? And dullness? Deadly dullness? (*He shudders*) How like London!

[*There is a long pause. The British Officer smiles; makes up his mind to say something; thinks better of it.*]

THE SOLDIER

In Valhalla they fight; and when they are tired of

fighting, they sit down together as friends, and tell of their battles. And then they fight again — and the Valkyries hover about them!

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*nodding emphatically*)

A belief in heaven, a heaven of peace, is very beautiful. But for *my* regiment, for the men *I* am to command, give me a belief in a fighting heaven.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

The boy is delirious. Nobody takes that sort of thing seriously.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Of course not.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Poetic, and noble: what you will. But it's rot, absolute rot.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

The most beautiful kind of rot. Serious beliefs, well-reasoned theologies, and we Germans are not bad at that sort of thing, may answer for times of peace. But when the bugles are blowing, and the thunder of cannon is in the air, give me a thought to fire my brain as a strong wine fires my body! Give me something to inspire me! Something to set my heart beating and the blood racing through my veins! Away with your beliefs! Give me ideals! (*He pauses*) Afterwards — long afterwards — when we have time to sit down and reason it out together, we may admit that our ideals were — well —

THE BRITISH OFFICER

False?

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*shaking his head, and emphasizing the word*)

Poetic, as *you* said — too beautiful to be true. But when we see the face of the enemy, hear the click of the men behind us fixing their bayonets, sense the short, sharp breathing of our neighbors, and find out that we too are breathing short and sharp, back we go to our ideals! Long live the Valkyrie!

THE SOLDIER

Long live the Valkyrie!

THE GERMAN OFFICER

The fighter goes to his reward!

THE BRITISH OFFICER

The fighter — fair or foul.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Fair or foul — does it matter?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

It matters *why* he is fighting. It takes a good cause to justify a fight.

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*with solemnity*)

A good fight justifies any cause! Right and wrong? (*He shakes his head*) I don't know. You don't know.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Then why not find out?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

We are giving a million lives to find out.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

And if you are wrong?

THE GERMAN OFFICER

A world where men are willing to die to find out if they are wrong is a world worth living in — or dying for.

THE SOLDIER (*after a pause*)

A few days — or a month ago — I don't know which — she sang for us, back of the trenches.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

What is he talking about?

THE SOLDIER (*sings a fragment of the melody of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyrie"*)

Hoy-oh-to-ho!

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*explaining*)

One of the Red Cross nurses; before the war she was a famous opera singer. She sang for the men.

THE SOLDIER

The Valkyrie! She sang! God, how she sang!

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*to the British Officer*)

It's from Wagner. You know the melody.

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*nodding*)

We could hear it in our trenches.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

What you call one of our false ideals. My brain tells me there is no Valkyrie. It's nothing but an old Norse legend, with as much truth to it as Odin and Thor. But when that song rings out, you clench your fists, and see red, and — and everything is unreal *but* the Valkyrie!

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Yes, I understand.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

False as hell, if you like, but beautiful! Beautiful! [*It has been growing darker steadily. In the distance the ruined church has long ago vanished from sight. The moon overhead is hidden by clouds.*]

[A rocket screams into the air from the German lines and explodes, illuminating the ground beneath with ghastly distinctness. There is a burst of firing from either side. The rocket goes out. Silence.]

THE GERMAN OFFICER (*in almost impenetrable darkness*)
They will be coming for me any minute now. You will give no alarm, I hope.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Your men must stop here. No surprise attacks, you know.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

I give you my word. No alarm?

THE BRITISH OFFICER

No alarm.

[*There is a pause.*]

THE GERMAN OFFICER

If they bring me back safely I will send them here to get you.

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*lightly*)

Hardly worth while. I'm done for.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

We'll give you a chance anyhow.

THE BRITISH OFFICER

And the boy.

THE GERMAN OFFICER

Of course the boy.

[*There is another pause. Then, in the utter darkness, the voice of the delirious soldier drills itself into one's consciousness with an uncanny effect.*]

THE SOLDIER

The Valkyrie! High above the battles, the Valkyrie!
Not where the whirring of looms, not where the buzz

of machines fills the air, but where the cannon crash, where the shouts of fighting men rise to the sky, where blows are struck and blood flows, the Valkyrie!

THE BRITISH OFFICER

Not so loud, boy.

THE SOLDIER (*disregarding him*)

To die, not in bed, with doctors and nurses around, and the smell of medicines in your nostrils, but to die in fair fight with your enemy, your rifle in your hand, and your head cradled on the breast of the Valkyrie!

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*trying to soothe him*)

Quiet! Quiet, for God's sake!

THE SOLDIER

In Valhalla the heroes fight, and wounds are given, but the Valkyrie heals them, and they fight again!
 [*As if his voice were that of a soloist leading an invisible orchestra, an uncertain sound of musketry fire in the far distance gradually approaches, and now, like instruments hurling their voices into the unison, explodes into a deafening uproar. Rockets soar into the air from either side, and as if their bursting were another signal, a noisy, whistling wind sweeps the clouds from the face of the moon. The battlefield, gaunt, naked, bare of trees and vegetation, is revealed in a cold, white light — and from right and left, eager, palpitating tongues of red fire leap from the throats of a thousand restless weapons. The German Officer has vanished — whether in safety or otherwise one may not know — but the Soldier's voice, high, triumphant, insistent, struggles with the fearful din.*]

THE SOLDIER

Valkyrie! Valkyrie! Hear me! Valkyrie! Hear me!

[His voice is lost in the awful uproar. And then, as a storm lulls in the midst of its fury, the firing ceases. Silence — an all pervading silence, follows with something of a shock upon the deafening waves of sound.

A pause.

THE SOLDIER (*faintly, in desperate appeal*)

Valkyrie! Hear me!

[On the instant, suddenly, abruptly, from behind the German trenches, rises a woman's voice, a God-given soprano, in the piercing notes of the battle-cry of the Valkyrie.

THE VOICE IN THE DISTANCE

Hoy-oh-to-ho! Hoy-oh-to-ho!

THE SOLDIER (*wildly excited*)

The Valkyrie!

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*almost sobbing in his anxiety*)

Quiet, you fool!

THE VOICE IN THE DISTANCE

Hoy-oh-to-ho!

THE SOLDIER (*springs to his feet in ecstasy, raising his arms to the skies in frenzied supplication*)

Valkyrie! Valkyrie!

[The report of a single rifle crashes through the silence. The expression of ecstasy does not leave the face of the Soldier, but over his features steals a surprised smile, as if in that instant some heavenly vista had opened before his eyes. And his knees bend quite slowly, and his body, like some worn-out garment, slips lifeless to the ground.

THE BRITISH OFFICER (*sobbing openly*)

Killed! The fool! Oh, the fool!

[*Pandemonium breaks out again, but strong, unconquerable, supreme above the uproar, the song in the distance rises higher — higher — !*]

THE CURTAIN FALLS GENTLY

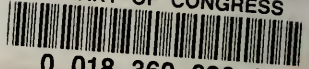








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